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Academic Library Outreach to Minority Students: The Role the Library Plays in Meeting the Needs of Minority Students at Francis Marion University

Abstract

As college student populations nationwide become more racially and ethnically diverse, it is imperative that academic libraries provide services and resources to meet the changing needs.

In a span of nearly 20 years, Francis Marion University's student population has shifted from 74% white and 24% black to nearly 50% black. Because of this, James A. Rogers Library at FMU is challenged with meeting these changing needs.

In efforts to diversify its services, James A. Rogers Library gives biennial surveys to FMU students to assess student needs and perception of the library and in 2010, the library created an African-American collection.

Keywords

library outreach, minority students, collection development



PEER REVIEWED ARTICLE

Academic Library Outreach to Minority Students: The Role the Library Plays in Meeting the Needs of Minority Students at Francis Marion University

By Bernadette Johnson

Many colleges and universities nationwide are witnessing a significant shift in the racial and ethnic makeup of their student bodies. With the increased opportunities for minorities to receive better education, many minorities are taking full advantage by enrolling in colleges and universities. "Nationally, minority student enrollment at universities and colleges across the country has risen rapidly over the past few decades and continues to grow" (Love, 2009, p. 4).

According to the Digest of Education Statistics, blacks have made up 15% and Hispanics 13.9% of Fall enrollees for the past few years. Since the enrollment of minority students has seen such a steady increase, it's important for academic libraries to increase their variety of library services, resources, and staff to meet the needs of minority students.

Francis Marion University (FMU), located in Florence, South Carolina, illustrates this changing racial makeup of the student population. According to statistics from the Human Resources Office of FMU, the Fall enrollment of undergraduate students shifted from 74% white and 24% black in 1994 to 46% white and 49% black in 2013. The black student population showed a drastic increase, whereas the other minority groups did not. The small percentage classified as Other in **Figure 1** makes up Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, Multiracials, Pacific Islanders, Non-Resident Aliens, and Unknowns.

However in **Figure 2**, the Fall enrollment of FMU graduate students does not show the same trend. The Fall graduate enrollment of blacks and other minorities from 1994-2013 remains relatively low compared to whites.

Whites still hold the overall majority of Fall enrollments when undergraduates and graduates are factored together. From 2010 to 2013, the average Fall enrollment of minority graduate students was 30% compared to the minority undergraduate Fall enrollment average of 53%. Although the FMU enrollment of minority graduate students remains low, it is overshadowed by the steep increase of enrollment of undergraduate minorities, specifically blacks.

James A. Rogers Library (Rogers Library) at Francis Marion University, like many academic libraries nationwide, is faced with the challenge of meeting the changing needs and demands of its student patrons. For instance, the library now faces a higher demand for African-American fiction and other books that explore African-American popular culture. Students desire to be in a learning environment that speaks to them and gives them something they can relate to.

The library has taken considerable strides in diversifying the library such as setting up bulletins with black and white photographs showing live Civil Rights marches, protests, and other photos related to the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960's. In honor of the Civil Rights' 50th anniversary, a temporary display showing video footage from that era is set up in the library's foyer entrance. The library has also developed a LibGuide for International and foreign exchange students. The guide informs foreign students of the programs and services offered to them by FMU and steps prospective foreign FMU students need to take in applying for FMU. As the student population changes, so will the needs and demands of the students who visit the library.

Another way to meet these needs is to diversify the library's collection. Because the fastest growing minority student population is African-American, the library is making efforts to include library resources that appeal to that population. To illustrate this effort, in 2010 the library was granted funding to build an African-American Collection. An African-American Steering Committee made up of librarians, library staff, and university professors was formed to oversee the development of this collection.

The African-American Steering Committee was originally tasked with establishing a collection highlighting the lives and accomplishments of African-Americans in the Pee Dee Region and across South Carolina. The committee later expanded the collection scope to include works by or about African-Americans in general, not just in South Carolina. This collection helps to meet the intellectual needs of the university's students. The collection consists of fiction, nonfiction, scholarly books, multivolume books, and the most recently added, DVDs, which are included with the book collection and can also be checked out.

In trying to determine the success of this collection, one question emerged: is the African-American Collection being utilized by students, faculty, staff, and other library visitors at a sufficient rate?

In 2013, a biennial library survey was given to FMU students in order to assess student needs and perceptions of the library. A total of 1058 surveys were distributed to randomly selected classes on campus. Out of the 1058, 462 completed the survey, which is 44%. Of those who responded, 25% were freshmen, 20% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, and 34% were seniors. One of the questions in the survey asked was if student ever used the African-American Collection. Only 11% of the responders indicated they've used the African-American Collection.

The fact that the AAC was developed only a few years ago may explain its low usage among students. Proper advertising and promotion, which will be discussed later, will help to increase awareness of this collection. Although the creation of an African American collection has been successful in diversifying the library's collection, it's not enough to draw the student population to the library and meet their information needs.

Many students come to the library looking for resources for their research topics that focus on African-American and other minority concerns both historical and current. MacAdam & Nichols state that librarians at Michigan's Undergraduate Library realize there are "groups of students with needs so particular that library services must be targeted specifically for them" (1989, p. 205).

In addition to books and DVDs in the African-American Collection, the library subscribes to several databases geared towards the African-American experience both historical and present. These acquired resources must also be properly managed and promoted to encourage utilization. LibGuides, by SpringShare are excellent tools for content management and promoting library resources. Since Rogers Library had previously created LibGuides for disciplines such as Education, Business, Biology, English etc., a LibGuide was also created for African-American studies which highlights and promotes the African-American Collection.

It is one matter to acquire all of these library resources; however, the library must also be promoted in a way to attract students and even faculty to the library in order to see all it has to offer both online and onsite. This is where advertisement and marketing comes into play and one of the most effective ways of marketing is through social media. Kim, Sin & Yoo-Lee (2014) claim that college students are particularly heavy users of social media, citing a 2011 Pew report that found over 80% of those surveyed used social media. Furthermore, Kim,

Sin & Yoo Lee note that librarians have used these social networks for student outreach. (p. 443)

Rogers Library uses Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr along with its website to promote library services, resources, and events. These networks can increasingly be used to raise awareness of African-American material.

It's very important that librarians and library staff not only work within the confines of the library, but to collaborate with students and faculty outside the library setting. One way way for academic libraries to reach their minority students is to get involved with multicultural and diversity organizations on campuses. Love claims that although multicultural outreach in academic libraries may not necessarily improve the retention rates of minority students, the low retention of these under-represented students should motivate academic libraries to implement multicultural programming (2007, p.14).

Rogers Library has representation on the FMU Multicultural Advisory Board (MAB). This representation hasn't yet made any major difference in library services because the library representation has not long been in place. However, with further collaboration with students on the MAB, the library can learn how to better serve the needs of diverse students.

The library also has staff and librarians serving as active members on the FMU African-American Faculty and Staff Coalition. The purpose of the coalition is to enhance cultural awareness, promote professional development among faculty, staff, and students, and to encourage retention and recruitment of African-American faculty and staff at FMU.

This library also has active members on the Round Table for African American Concerns (RAAC), which is a round table within the South Carolina Library Association (SCLA). The purpose of this roundtable is to promote the recruitment and retention of minority librarians in South Carolina and to help libraries acquire

services to meet the information needs of minorities.

One way to possibly determine the effectiveness of these efforts is to compare the graduation rate of minority students to white students. Nationwide, the graduation rates of blacks and Native-Americans lag behind that of whites and Asian-Americans by a significant margin. Love (2007) observed the following:

The retention rates of minority students across the United States are staggeringly uneven between white students and minority students. In *Retaining African Americans in Higher Education*, Lee Jones (2001, 7) wrote that in 1997, African Americans and Native Americans trailed behind the graduation rates of whites and Asian-American students. Across the nation, the average retention rates of white students stood at fifty-eight percent, whereas for African-American students, the retention rate was eighteen percent lower, at forty percent. (p. 14)

Table 1 shows the number of FMU black and other minority bachelor's degree recipients compared to FMU white bachelor's degree recipients in raw numbers, and **Figure 3** shows it in percentage. The number of black bachelor's degree recipients is lower than those of whites, but not by a terribly large margin. The other minorities' graduation number is far lower and understandably so because their rate of enrollment is extremely low. The data also shows that the number of black graduates remained steady for the past several years, which is very encouraging. However, there is still room for improvement.

The encouraging statistics of the minority student graduation rate shows there is a level of satisfaction being had by FMU's minority students for them to stay on and graduate. Although it can't be said for sure if Rogers Library helped to bring about these improving graduation statistics, the library has worked diligently to diversify the learning environment for students.

Nevertheless, there are many ways the library can continue to improve services offered to both minority students and to students in general. Along with its university, it is Rogers Library's top priority to provide all students the

best service possible in their quest for a higher education. An academic library is the information center of its university and plays a key role in the continuing education of all its students.

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Appendix:

Figure 1 - Percentage of FMU Fall Enrollment of Undergraduate Students by Race 1994 – 2013:

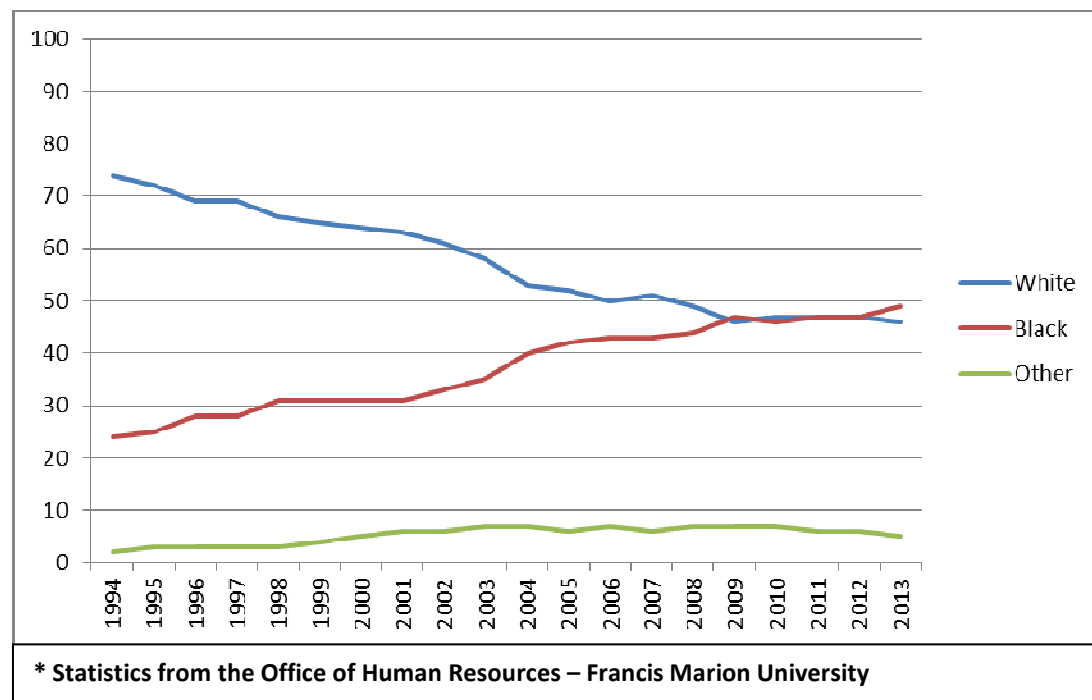


Figure 2 - Percentage of FMU Fall Enrollment of Graduate Students by Race 1994 – 2013:

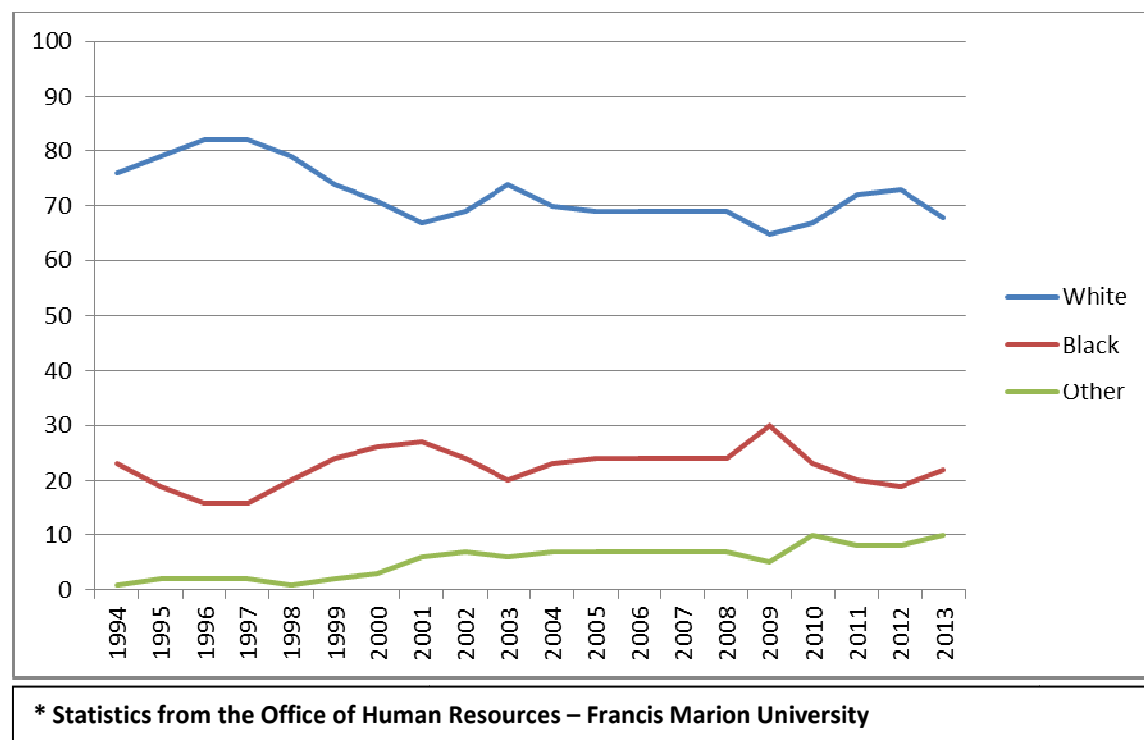


Table 1 – Number of Bachelor Degree Recipients by Race

2007-2014

Year	Black	White	Other	Total
2007-2008	177	287	37	501
2008-2009	191	275	30	496
2009-2010	212	283	29	524
2010-2011	224	297	32	553
2011-2012	219	304	43	566
2012-2013	221	315	50	586

* Statistics from the Office of Human Resources – Francis Marion University